

[By Rep. Peter Welch](#)

America pays its bills. It always has. It always will.

The fact that Washington is now debating whether to honor its debts and obligations, then, should come as a surprise. But playing political football with a necessary vote to raise the nation's debt ceiling has become as predictable as a Twitter rant from Charlie Sheen.

The predictability should not, however, detract from its seriousness. Holding the nation's full faith and credit hostage for political gain could imperil a fragile economic recovery and sow seeds of a global economic meltdown. While there is a great temptation in both parties to use this debate to their advantage, the political peril for each is enormous.

Democrats have a real opportunity to get ahead here and state the obvious: The U.S. will not default on its debts. Our party has the opportunity to get behind a clean bill with no extraneous provisions – to separate an important but unrelated battle on future spending from an unpalatable but, ultimately, necessary decision to pay our bills.

Historically, the minority party in Congress votes against raising the debt limit, forcing the majority party to whip its members into casting politically painful votes in favor.

House Democrats who believe that voting against raising the ceiling can bolster their fiscal responsibility bona fides – or, more cynically, force the hand of a Republican majority now dealing with a restive tea party base – misread the will of the American people. If we escalate the rhetoric and use brinksmanship on the nation's fiscal credibility, then Americans will rightfully question the ability of their elected representatives to govern responsibly.

In addition, if Democrats allow ourselves to conflate the issues and trade budget cuts for a debt ceiling vote, we start playing a game we cannot win. Republicans will have forced our hand, and we would likely find ourselves acceding to the demands of a party willing to take hostage our nation's full faith and credit.

Instead, Democrats should tell it like it is. Raising the debt ceiling is not agreeing to future spending. It is honoring past commitments. It is acknowledging the unfortunate reality that, for too long, neither party has taken seriously our responsibility to live within our means.

The peril facing Republicans, should they decide to gamble a fragile economic recovery on appeasing their most ardent believers, is equally great. When voters handed the GOP control of the House last fall, they were expressing a desire to get the nation's fiscal house in order. If Republicans push the economy to the brink in the name of overzealous cuts, however, they will have misinterpreted the will of the American people and overplayed their hand.

Yes, it is long past time we get serious about tackling the nation's ever-growing deficits. But the average American family drawn into serious debt cannot just threaten to stiff its creditors. It must cut its spending in the future, but also take responsibility for the debt incurred in the past.

Democrats can neither control nor predict whether our GOP counterparts are really ready to play chicken with the U.S. economy. But we can assure the American people that our party takes the nation's faith and credit seriously.

We should get behind a clean bill to raise the debt ceiling — and allow our colleagues on the other side of the aisle to explain whether or not their notion of fiscal responsibility includes paying the bills.